


Under his Spell

THE TRUE STORY OF HARRY POTTER
AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

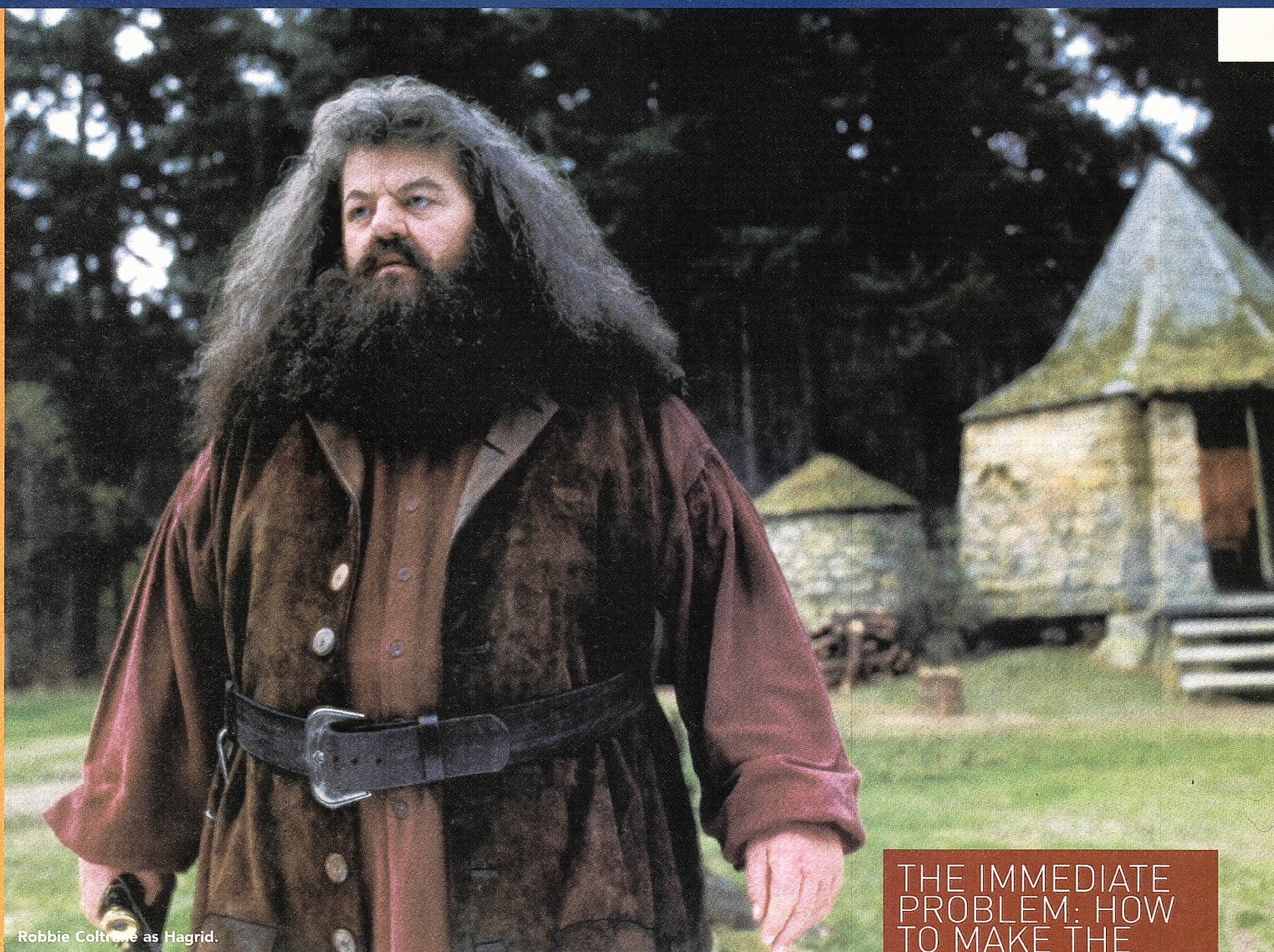


The window of opportunity for popular phenomena is pretty narrow these days. You're in one day and out the next. But let the record show that somewhere between the peak of PS2 mania and the release of Microsoft's Xbox, a fledgling wizard called Harry Potter reigned supreme.

■ HARRY POTTER - THE MAKING OF THE PHENOMENON

Swimming against the cultural flow, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels have achieved the kind of universal acceptance that the digital media overlords can only dream about. Millions of children all over the world were reminded of the simple power of paper—and-ink, and the joy inherent in the simple action of turning a page.

When Rowling received an honorary degree at St Andrews University in 2000, the Dean credited her with single-handedly proving that children's books "are still capable of capturing and enchanting an immense audience, irrespective of the competing attractions of television, Nintendo, Gameboy and PokÉmon. At a time when dire predictions were being made for the future of books, children are rediscovering the pure joy of reading." And it wasn't just children. The book's American publisher, Scholastic, noted that



Robbie Coltrane as Hagrid.

30 percent of the first three *Harry Potter* books were purchased by or for a reader 35 or older. "Adult" covers were designed specifically so that grown-ups would not be embarrassed to read the book in public. For more than twenty months, the *Harry Potter* series occupied the top three slots of the New York Times' adult fiction best-seller list and would have captured a fourth were it not for the fact that "children's books" (i.e., *Potter* books) were evicted from the prime marketing real estate of the Times' Best-seller list that they were dominating and relegated to a list of their own.

The old marketing slogan "You've read the Book — Now See the Movie!" was playing in reverse until *Harry Potter* came along. Nineties-style "synergistic" marketing strategies saw a movie released with an accompanying book, action figure set and video game in its wake. Not so *Harry Potter*. He was already "cool", the president of a club that you could join only by reading. When Warner Brothers bought the film rights therefore, they were faced

with an immediate problem: How to make a blockbusting movie-merchandising tie-in without alienating the tens-of-millions of intelligent, discriminating and loyal *Potter* fans for whom the intensely private interaction between reader and writer was the foundation of Harry's appeal? It soon became obvious that this movie would have to be made with an uncommon degree of care and attention to detail. Without it, everyone stood to lose.

■ HARRY POTTER VS THE HOLLYWOOD MUGGLES

The choice of a director would clearly prove critical to the project. After all, the easily bruised feelings of a generation of readers attuned to Rowling's clear visual style were at stake. There was an obvious choice — Steven Spielberg, and early media speculation suggested that the multi-award winner was extremely interested. *The Times* of London reported that Spielberg was rumoured to be toying with the idea of making a computer-animated

THE IMMEDIATE PROBLEM: HOW TO MAKE THE FILM WITHOUT ALIENATING LOYAL FANS.

version of the book after getting an exclusive look at the 138 page first draft by screenwriter Steve [Wonderboys] Kloves. At this stage, Spielberg had apparently beaten out several top-name directors for the job — Robert Zemeckis, Jonathan Demme and Mike Newell for example — but it was still far from a done deal. Spielberg indicated that he would have to put off several high-profile projects — including *A.I.* — the project he had sworn to complete for his late friend Stanley Kubrick.

However, by early 2000, what seemed likely was proving anything but. With the book published under the AOL-Time-Warner umbrella, Warner were insisting that the film be made in-house and not at Spielberg's own Dreamworks Studio.


Some weeks later, a Spielberg representative told *The Hollywood Reporter* that

ment portrayed in the novel. Columbus came to London during the making *Young Sherlock Holmes* (1985), a film he now regards as a kind of accidental predecessor to *Harry Potter*, featuring as it does two high school kids facing the supernatural in a grim-visaged public school. When interviewed by the BBC in 2000, Columbus tried to allay suspicions by announcing that he was in fact "obsessed" with British cinema, namechecking David Lean, Ealing Studios and British humourists Monty Python. "All those things were a part of me when I was growing up," said the Pennsylvania-born director. J.K. Rowling's well-publicised insistence on an all-British cast and her determination that the film should be a faithful reflection of her creation would have been just as influential. Columbus also surrounded himself with high-profile production talent, including Oscar-winning production designer Stuart Craig (*The English Patient*, *The Elephant Man*), costume designer Judianna Makovsky (*Pleasantville*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*) and director of photography John

Seale, the Australian cinematographer responsible for *The Perfect Storm* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Music was regarded as crucial to the film's success, and five-time Academy Award winner John Williams was drafted to score the film.

After auditioning hundreds of young actors for the central role of Harry, Columbus opted for a relative neophyte in Daniel Radcliffe. It was a canny piece of casting. Just eleven years old when he was cast, Radcliffe came to the screen without the baggage of previous characters. Up to this point, he had only been seen in John Boorman's decidedly non-blockbusting *The Tailor of Panama* and the 1999 BBC TV adaptation of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*.

Radcliffe also exuded a genuine "Englishness", the kind of reserve that comes naturally to actors born and bred in the UK. Radcliffe also benefited immensely from being surrounded by some of the finest character actors in the world. Maggie Smith (who plays Professor McGonagall and also appeared with Radcliffe in *Copperfield*) and Alan Rickman (Professor Snape) are renowned for their work in theatre as much as for their film work. "Here [in Britain]," said Columbus, "it's all about becoming a better actor and maintaining consistency in your craft, as opposed to going from one movie to another and not trying anything different. I think that gets you kind of stale." A collective sigh of relief went up when veteran actor Richard Harris joined the star-studded cast as Dumbledore.



ANGLOPHILE CHRIS COLUMBUS NAMECHECKED DAVID LEAN, EALING STUDIOS AND MONTY PYTHON AS INFLUENCES.



Daniel Radcliffe
as boy wizard,
Harry Potter.

■ THE MAGICIAN WORKS HIS MAGIC

The marketing of the movie began long before the filming was wrapped, and was expertly released with a drip-drip effect. Great secrecy surrounded filming

(which was mainly shot at Leavesdon Studios in Hertfordshire) and very little "unofficial" movie gossip made it out of the set unless it was pre-approved by Columbus. The first teaser was the release of the picture of Harry's beloved owl Hedwig. And then nothing for a while, until photos of the train at Platform 9 3/4, which takes the young wizards to Hogwarts School. But having started with such a measured marketing campaign, the floodgates were then opened. Subsequent trailers revealed the flying broomsticks, moving stairs and even the magical Golden Snitch. Virtually every newspaper published "exclusive" supplements of new photos from the film. Could there really be any big screen surprises left?

There was certainly one. Coca-Cola shelled out a reported \$US100 million for a product tie-in. Despite Rowling's stringent conditions that Harry's image could not be used on Coca Cola products and Coke's pledge to fund literacy schemes, many fans were upset at what they saw as a sell out.

But regardless of what hardcore Potterphiles were saying in their internet chat rooms, critics and audiences were surprised to see that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* stayed remarkably faithful to its source. With the exception of occasional details, short scenes, and a poltergeist, everything in the book is in the movie. Indeed, much of Steve Kloves' dialogue is lifted directly from the text. Columbus' approach to the project was cautious but he expertly delivered Rowling's herd of colourful characters and accurately represented the book's best elements — the fast-paced, inventive adventure, the liberal doses of comedy and the suggestions of true pathos. More importantly, Columbus ensured that his movie did not talk down to its viewers. Adults can watch the film — even if they aren't chaperoning offspring.

Viewed exclusively as a piece of cinema — something extraordinarily difficult to do with this property — Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone stands out as a solid piece of inter-generational entertainment. The film's spell may not be as potent as that of the book, but there's magic in what Columbus and his crew have wrought. The box office figures certainly back up their approach: Harry Potter now ranks as the second highest grossing film of all time.

DUMBLEDORE'S

Words of Wisdom

Richard Harris talks to DVD Now about making movie magic.

DVD Now: Richard, you weren't too keen on doing this at first, were you?

Harris: Yeah, but not because of the material. I think the material is superb. It's just I hate any form of commitment. And it meant if I did the first one, then I've gotta do the rest. As many as Warner Bros. decides on doing, I'd have to do them. I don't like to be tied down like that. I lost two wives because I couldn't commit. So that kind of commitment to me is too much.

DVD Now: So what got you to commit?

Harris: It seemed to have been advertised in the newspaper. I think the story was all the actors in the world were queueing up to be in Harry Potter, and Richard Harris has turned it down, criticizing me, of course. So my granddaughter read it and she's a Harry Potter fanatic, and she read it, called me up and said, "Papa, if you don't play Dumbledore, I'll never speak to you again." So I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

DVD Now: Where did you find Dumbledore?

Harris: Where did I find him? Well, I just thought he was probably the easiest character to play, of all the characters, in it. I know that a lot of the actors had long conversations with Rowling about their characters. I didn't. I've never spoken to her in my life. I would know her if she walked in the door. But I think that, it was just written, it's there. You don't have to do any investigation or research. It's there. How

can you research a man that's ageless, timeless? And I just found the secret of playing it was not to interfere with it. Not to intrude. Don't become too actorish. I mean, don't say, 'This is Richard Harris' Dumbledore.' It's not Richard Harris' Dumbledore, it's Rowling's Dumbledore, and all you've got to do is just go with it. Don't interfere with it, don't be cute, don't start inventing, it's there. And the simpler you are in a part, the better. You just have to walk into it. They talk about him [Dumbledore] a lot and we all know he's wide and authoritative, and all those wonderful qualities he has. So you don't have to invent it, it's there. All I had to do was find a voice, 'cause I knew that my voice is of a seventy-one year old now, and it's too strong for the character. So I got a drawing of Dumbledore and then I got tape recorders and I practiced the speeches - the rhythms, the tempo and the energy behind the voice. And then I would play the tape and I would look at the image to see if the voice suited the image? And after trial and error I think I found the voice, and that was it. The rest was simple. Ha ha.

DVD Now: Which of the magic tricks in the film would you like to be able to perform?

Harris: I'd like to pick up a wand now and say to you, 'Disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear, disappear.' And point it to me and I'd be in bed, curing a hangover. That's what I would wish.

DVD Now: What did you think of the performances of the kids in the film?

Harris: I thought they were wonderful. I thought they were superb. And I thought he [Daniel Radcliffe] had the more difficult part, and I thought he was directed beautifully by Chris Columbus. And Emma is Emma, she's charming and childish and she's knowledgeable. And Ron is the same. But there was something else in Radcliffe that Columbus sought for and got and that was stillness, quiet. He doesn't act at all, practically, and [Columbus] almost created an enigma out of this kid. Every time the camera focused on him, you had the impression there was hundreds and thousands of years of wisdom behind those eyes. He didn't have to do anything. You were always curious about him. You were always wondering what's inside that head. Whereas, the others were kids and expressive. But there was something else in his [Radcliffe's] performance I thought was magic, absolutely magic. The boy wasn't that experienced to have created it, it had to have been something Columbus saw.

DVD Now: What do you think of the world of magic that the film creates?

Harris: I've lived in a world of magic all my life, so it doesn't surprise me. The motion picture business is magic. The theatre is magic. And I've spent my whole life in it. So when something like this comes up I'm not overawed by it. It's an amazing movie and it's part of the magic of our business. ■